

Reagan kept a loose rein

Led to staff overreaching, Turner says

By Warren Richey

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Washington

President Reagan's "hands off" management style may have encouraged White House staff members to take the initiative in setting up the secret Iran-contra connection, according to a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Stansfield Turner, who served as CIA director during the Carter administration, also questioned the legality

of a reported oral presidential national-security "finding" said to have authorized secret arms sales to Iran via Israel in 1985.

Mr. Turner warned, however, of the dangers of an overreaction to the Iran-contra affair in Congress that might lead to severe restrictions on the President's ability to conduct covert activities in the future.

In a breakfast meeting with reporters Tuesday, Mr. Turner said he be-

lieved that an underlying cause of the Iran-contra affair was President Reagan's reluctance to become involved in the day-to-day details of special operations organized by staff members working in his National Security Council.

"The management style of this President is such that he could have encouraged people [under him] to feel that he didn't want to know [the specifics of their activities]. Not necessarily because he wanted to be able to deny it, but because that was not a level of detail that he normally wanted to get into," Turner said.

"[Lt. Col. Oliver] North was encouraged by the President, his chief of staff, and [national-security adviser John M.] Poindexter to go out there and really support these contras, even at the risk of flouting a law," he added.

President Reagan and other top administration officials have said they had no prior knowledge of the secret Iran-contra connection. The effort to divert the profits of Iran arms sales to rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government was allegedly organized and run by Colonel North, a mid-level NSC staff member.

Turner was critical of top members of the Reagan administration for "running for cover and passing the buck to everyone else" in the current crisis. "It is showing a neglect of responsibility," Turner said. He added that many of Reagan's senior advisers - including White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan - should be fired or step down.

"I don't see how the President can reconstitute public confidence with these

same people," he said.

The former CIA director also questioned the legality of a reported 1985 presidential "finding" that orally authorized secret Israeli shipments of US arms to Iran.

According to former national-security adviser Robert McFarlane, President Reagan made an oral "finding" during a conversation with Mr. McFarlane in mid-1985. The White House denies that any finding was made until a formal written finding was signed by the President on Jan. 17. That finding authorized secret US shipments of arms to Iran.

The issue is a critical one for Israeli officials who maintain that no US arms were shipped to Iran from Israel in 1985 without prior explicit US authorization. US and Israeli officials and assorted middlemen were involved in various aspects of the secret Iran arms plan during at least the last six months of 1985. It is unclear under what legal authority they operated.

Turner said that, in his view, oral findings by a president were not a legal means to initiate a covert operation. But others disagree.

Daniel B. Silver, former general counsel of the CIA and the National Security Agency, says that there is nothing in the wording of the law that requires that a presidential finding be written. He notes that all that is required is that the president determine that the proposed covert action be important to US national security. "The statute only requires that the president make such a finding, not that he write it down," Mr. Silver said.

He noted, however, that standard practice in the White House has been that national-security findings are recorded in writing and signed by Reagan.



Turner doubts legality of oral security findings

FILE PHOTO/BARTH FALKENBERG